

*Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009*

**Remarks at Naval Air Station Jacksonville, Florida**

*October 26, 2009*

Thank you, everybody. How's it going, Jacksonville? Let me begin by thanking Secretary Mabus for the introduction, for your service, Ray. I know we've got a lot of naval aviators here, and Ray is a former surface warfare officer. But don't hold that against him. Don't hold that against him, now, because Ray Mabus is doing an outstanding job as Secretary of the Navy.

I also want to thank all your outstanding local leaders for welcoming me here today: Admiral Tim Alexander, your CO, Captain Jack Scorby, and your Command Master Chief, Jeff Hudson. To Chris Scorby and all the spouses who are with us, you hold our military families together. We honor you and we are grateful to you.

Now, it is great to be here at one of America's finest naval air stations. But we also have folks from Mayport and Kings Bay. And we have every service represented: Navy, Army, Air Force, Coast Guard, and United States Marines from Blount Island.

Now, military communities like this one take care of their own, your people, your families. But keeping you strong also takes the civilian community beyond the gate. So we want to thank Mayor John Peyton and all your great neighbors, the people of Jacksonville, for their incredible support. Give them a big round of applause.

Keeping you strong also takes leaders in Congress, like those here today: two great friends of yours, Representatives Ander Crenshaw and Corrine Brown, who are here. Give them a big round of applause right here. And a leader who fights for you as a member of the Armed Services Committee, Senator—and Army veteran—Bill Nelson is in the house.

Keeping you strong takes something else, a country that never forgets this simple truth: It's not the remarkable platforms that give the United States our military superiority, although you've got some pretty impressive aircraft here, I got to admit. It's not the sophisticated technologies that make us the most advanced in the world, although you do represent the future of naval aviation. No, we have the finest Navy and the finest military in the history of the world because we have the finest personnel in the world. You are the best trained, the best prepared, the best led force in history. Our people are our most precious resource.

We're reminded of this again with today's helicopter crashes in Afghanistan. Fourteen Americans gave their lives. And our prayers are with these service members, their civilian colleagues, and the families who loved them. And while no words can ease the ache in their hearts today, may they find some comfort in knowing this: Like all those who give their lives in service to America, they were doing their duty, and they were doing this Nation proud. They were willing to risk their lives, in this case, to prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a safe haven for Al Qaida and its extremist allies. Today they gave their lives, that last full measure of devotion, to protect ours.

Now, it is our duty as a nation to keep their memory alive in our hearts and to carry on their work, to take care of their families, to keep our country safe, to stand up for the values we hold dear and the freedom they defended. That's what they dedicated their lives to, and that is what we must do as well.

So I say to you and all who serve: Of all the privileges I have as President, I have no greater honor than serving as your Commander in Chief. You inspire me. And I'm here today to deliver a simple message, a message of thanks to you and your families.

Now, being here, you join a long, unbroken line of service at Jacksonville, from the naval aviators from World War II to Korea to Vietnam, among them a great patriot named John McCain. You embody that sailor's creed, the "spirit of the Navy and all who have gone before": honor, courage, commitment.

In recent years, you've been tested like never before. We're a country of more than 300 million Americans, but less than 1 percent wears the uniform. And that 1 percent—you and those in uniform—bear the overwhelming burden of our security.

After months of exercises in the Pacific and stopping narcotraffickers off South America, you, the Mad Foxes, joined the recovery of that Air France crash off Brazil. After hundreds of combat missions over Iraq and Afghanistan, when Somali pirates kidnapped Captain Richard Phillips, you, the Fighting Tigers, were first on the scene. And others among you, the Nightdippers, were part of the carrier group that brought our captain home. You've delivered medical care to people around the world, as my wife Michelle saw this summer when she welcomed back to port the *Comfort*, including those of you from Naval Hospital Jacksonville. And like thousands of sailors in today's Navy, you've gone ashore to meet the mission of our time, like the Desert Lions who served in Iraq.

Today we also send our thoughts and prayers to all the folks from Jacksonville on the frontlines at this very moment: pilots and aircrews around the world, Navy corpsmen on the ground in Afghanistan. And those of you, the Dusty Dogs, who'll deploy next month to the Persian Gulf, you're going to make us proud.

But there is no service without sacrifice. And though few Americans will ever truly understand the sacrifices that you and your family make, day in, day out, tour after tour, year after year, I want you to know this: Your dedication to duty is humbling. Your love of country is inspiring. The American people thank you for your service. We honor your sacrifices. And just as you have fulfilled your responsibilities to our Nation, your Nation will fulfill its responsibilities to you.

That's the message that I just offered to the inspiring Gold Star families I met with a few moments ago, families who've made the ultimate sacrifice and whom we honor. And that's the message I bring to you and all our forces, families, and veterans around Jacksonville and across America.

You've made the most profound commitment a person can make, to dedicate your life to your country and perhaps give your life for it. So as your Commander in Chief, here's the commitment I make to you. To make sure you can meet the missions we ask of you, we are increasing the defense budget, including spending on the Navy and Marine Corps. This week I'll sign that defense authorization bill into law.

To make sure we're spending our defense dollars wisely, we're cutting tens of billions of dollars in waste and projects that even the military says it doesn't need, so that that money can be better spent on taking care of you and your families and building the 20th—21st century military that we do need.

To make sure we have the right force structure, we've halted reductions in Navy personnel and increased the size of the Marine Corps. And this year—the first time in the history of the

All-Volunteer Force—the Navy and every component of every branch of the military, active, Guard, and Reserve, met or exceeded their recruiting and retention goals. And yes, that's due in part to tough economic times, but I say it's also a testament to you and everyone who volunteers to serve.

To make sure you're not bearing the burden of our security alone, we're enlisting all elements of our national power: diplomacy, development, and a positive vision of American leadership in the world.

And while I will never hesitate to use force to protect the American people or our vital interests, I also promise you this, and this is very important as we consider our next steps in Afghanistan: I will never rush the solemn decision of sending you into harm's way. I won't risk your lives unless it is absolutely necessary. And if it is necessary, we will back you up to the hilt, because you deserve the strategy, the clear mission, and the defined goals as well as the equipment and support that you need to get the job done. We are not going to have a situation in which you are not fully supported back here at home. That is a promise that I will always make to you.

Now, as you meet your missions around the world, we will take care of your families here at home. That's why Michelle has been visiting bases across the country. That's why the Recovery Act is funding projects like improvements to your hospital and a new child development center at Mayport. It's why we're increasing your pay, increasing childcare, helping families deal with the stress and separation of war.

And finally, we pledge to be there when you come home. We're improving care for our wounded warriors, especially those with posttraumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries. We're funding the post-9/11 GI bill to give you and your families the chance to pursue your dreams. And we are making the biggest commitment to our veterans—the largest percentage increase in the VA budget, even when we've got very difficult times fiscally—in more than 30 years.

Now, these are the commitments I make to you, the obligations that your country is honor bound to uphold. Because you've always taken care of America, and America must take care of you always.

And know this. It's the spirit you live by every day. It's the pride, and yes, sometimes the anxiety, when you wave goodbye to your loved ones on the tarmac. It's the joy and relief when those loved ones come safely home. It's the dignity and respect you show every fallen warrior who comes home to Jacksonville, like the Navy aviator you honored 2 months ago.

Captain Michael Scott Speicher, kid from Orange Park, loving husband, devoted father, based at Cecil Field not far from here. On the first day of Operation Desert Storm, he was taken from us. And in the long years that followed, a Navy family and this city would endure the heartache of the unknown.

Through all those years, no one missed Scott more or fought harder to bring him home than his wife Joanne, his friend and former Navy pilot Buddy Harris, their children Meghan, Michael, Madison, and Makenzie. They were among the Gold Star families I met with, and we thank them for being here with us today. Where are they? Please stand up. Stand up, guys.

This summer, the news came. After 18 years, after all the dashed hopes, we found him. Scott's remains were finally coming home. The evening news and the morning papers told the story of that day, but few told the story of the days that followed.

It's the story of how you greeted the plane upon landing—hundreds of sailors—and escorted Scott's flag-draped casket to your chapel; how Navy honor guards kept constant vigil, through the night, as so many of you passed by to pay your respects; how thousands of you—sailors and civilians—lined the streets of this base as you gave Scott back to the city he loved. That's what you did, that's what you do, not only for Scott, but for all the fallen warriors you bring home.

It's the story of how that procession retraced the steps of Scott's life, past the Jacksonville veterans memorial that now bears his name, past the church where he worshiped, the high school where he excelled, and Cecil Field where he served.

It's the story of how Jacksonville seemed to come to a standstill as people lined street after street to honor one of their own: Scott's friends but also total strangers, police and firefighters standing at attention, small children holding American flags, graying veterans giving a firm salute. And then, as Scott was finally laid to rest, a final fitting tribute, his old squadron roared overhead, high across the sky.

That's the spirit we see here today. You, men and women devoted to each other and to your country, and a proud country devoted to you. The example you set for all of us, That if you can come together, from every corner of America, every color, faith, creed, every background and belief, to take care of each other and to serve together, to succeed together, then so can we all. So can America.

So thank you for your service. And thank you for reminding us of the country we can and must always be. God bless you, Jacksonville. And God bless the United States of America. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:29 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Rear Adm. Townsend G. "Tim" Alexander, USN, commander, Navy Region Southwest; and Capt. John C. Scorby, Jr., USN, commanding officer, and Command Master Chief Jeffrey S. Hudson, USN, Naval Air Station Jacksonville, FL.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : Naval Air Station Jacksonville, FL.

*Locations:* Jacksonville, FL.

*Names:* Alexander, Townsend G. "Tim"; Brown, Corrine; Crenshaw, Ander; Harris, Buddy; Hudson, Jeffrey S.; Mabus, Raymond E.; McCain, John; Nelson, William; Obama, Michelle; Peyton, John S.; Phillips, Richard; Scorby, Chris; Scorby, John C., Jr.; Speicher, Joanne; Speicher, Madison; Speicher, Makenzie; Speicher, Meghan; Speicher, Michael.

*Subjects:* Afghanistan : U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration personnel, casualties; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : Expansion; Armed Forces, U.S. : Funding; Armed Forces, U.S. : GI bill legislation; Armed Forces, U.S. : Gold Star families, meeting with President; Armed Forces, U.S. : Humanitarian aid and relief missions; Armed Forces, U.S. : Military families; Armed Forces, U.S. : Military family benefits, expansion of; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Casualties; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Pay increase; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), treatment efforts; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Service and dedication; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Traumatic brain injuries, treatment efforts; Armed Services, U.S. : Service members :: Deployment; Defense, Department of : Budgetary discipline; Economy, national : American

Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009; Florida : Naval Air Station Jacksonville; Florida : President's visit; France : Air France Flight 447 crash; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Iraq : U.S. service member's remains, recovery efforts; Justice, Department of : Drug Enforcement Administration, U.S.; Legislation, enacted : National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010; Navy, Department of the : Naval Air Station Jacksonville, FL; Navy, Department of the: Secretary; Somalia : Commercial vessel hostage, rescue; South America : Crime and narcotrafficking; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist group; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Funding.

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